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What is This?

Achieving Validation: Barack Obama and Black Turnout in 2008

Seth C. McKee[1], M. V. Hood, III[2], and David Hill[3]

Abstract

In this study we examine black voting in the 2008 presidential election. Recognizing the significance of having an African American win the presidency, we evaluate black political attitudes in 2008 vis-à-vis 2004, place black turnout in historical context, and discuss the problem of vote overreporting. The issue of vote overreporting plagues surveys, and this is particularly notable among African American respondents. The momentousness of Barack Obama's candidacy and subsequent election may further complicate black turnout responses. On the one hand, an African American Democratic presidential nominee is expected to mobilize blacks, but on the other hand this situation is also expected to increase the social desirability to misreport voting. To get around this intractable problem with surveys, we evaluate validated black turnout in the state of Georgia, which provides individual-level data on the population of registered voters. The validated black turnout numbers are much lower than those reported in national studies like the Current Population Survey, but our analysis indicates that compared to 2004, African American registration and voting in Georgia were markedly higher in 2008.

Keywords

elections, presidential elections, political participation, racial politics, voting behavior

After 54 consecutive elections and 219 years since the founding of the Republic, a major party finally nominated, and the American voter subsequently elected, the first African American president. This unprecedented event has of course spawned

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numerous books and articles that dissect from various angles the reasons why Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States. One of the major factors that enabled Obama to win the Democratic nomination and then the presidency was the mobilization of black voters (Bullock and Gaddie 2009). According to the national exit polls, African Americans increased from 11% of the electorate to 13% between 2004 and 2008, and their support for the Democratic presidential nominee increased from 88% in 2004 to 95% in 2008.[1]

Several academic journals have allocated generous amounts of space to examinations of the 2008 presidential election and the historic election of the first black president. For instance, this burgeoning literature includes a special issue in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the March 2008 issue of the *Du Bois Review*, the October 2008 symposium in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and the June and September 2010 issues of *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. Within this literature the role of black turnout in contributing to Obama's presidential victory has of course been documented (see e.g., Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009), but we are not aware of a single published study examining *validated* black turnout in the 2008 presidential election. The absence of any published studies assessing validated African American participation in the 2008 presidential election is potentially problematic because of what past research tells us about voting behavior and black voting behavior more specifically.

First, we know that self-reported turnout rates are consistently higher than validated turnout measures. Social desirability is the primary explanation for this phenomenon; simply put, there is societal pressure to claim voting even if one has not, because the act of voting is a highly valued norm in a representative democracy like the United States. Second, a considerable number of studies (which we will discuss) show that African Americans have a greater propensity to overreport voting than do whites. Enter the 2008 presidential election and it is apparent how analyses of black turnout based on self-reported survey data may have serious flaws.

The possibility of drawing unreliable conclusions regarding black participation in 2008 is grounded in the biases associated with self-reported turnout measures. We contend that the 2008 presidential election is uniquely problematic for assessing self-reported black turnout because: (1) The presence of the first African American major party presidential nominee should boost black turnout, but (2) the presence of the first African American major party presidential nominee should also increase the likelihood of African Americans to falsely claim voting. Survey data cannot resolve this conundrum because we can never be certain how much of an increase in the self-reported vote was due to genuine mobilization versus a greater propensity to overreport. The only way to resolve this problem is to analyze validated black turnout, and that is what we do in this study by examining validated voting data from the state of Georgia.

We would like to have a national sample of African Americans whose voting in 2008 was validated. But these data do not exist and the most widely used data source we have, the American National Election Studies (ANES), stopped validating presidential turnout after the 1988 election. Short of this, we are fortunate that five states do

in fact collect data on their registered populations broken down by race (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina) (Bullock and Gaddie 2009). Among these states there remain issues of accessibility (e.g., data costs are prohibitively high in Louisiana and South Carolina) and availability (there is a short window for accessing election-specific data in all of these states). For Georgia, the state we have data on, the detailed racial categories in the voter registration file allow us to confine our analyses to non-Hispanic African Americans (and non-Hispanic whites when we make comparisons across racial groups). In short, we can examine with great precision turnout rates for the entire registered black population in the state with the nation's third largest number of African Americans that also validates voting.

We begin our study with a review of ANES data on turnout in presidential elections and discuss previous research that finds African Americans have a greater likelihood to overreport voting. We then turn our attention to the validated data on registered voters in the state of Georgia. After making turnout comparisons between the Georgia Registration File (GRF) and the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, we present two multivariate analyses of black voting based on the validated GRF. The first model is set up as a panel so we can capture the increase in voting between 2004 and 2008 among the same individuals who were registered for both of these contests. The second model consists of a cross-section of all black Georgia residents who were registered to vote in the 2008 election.

We stress the need for accurate data on black turnout because a survey comparison once again demonstrates the large discrepancy in the reported versus validated rate of African American voting. Having validated turnout data allows us to acknowledge the significance of the 2008 election: Despite a large gap in reported versus verified black turnout, our findings make it evident that in a Deep South[2] state with the nation's third largest African American population, black voting increased to the point of being commensurate with white participation.[3]

Black Turnout in Presidential Elections

For the third consecutive presidential election, turnout increased in 2008, and part of this increase in voting is attributable to greater African American participation (see McDonald 2008). The ANES data reflect a much more engaged black electorate in 2008. For instance, Figure 1 shows several factors associated with turnout, and compared to 2004, African Americans registered an increase on all of these indicators: (1) much greater affect toward Barack Obama than John Kerry, according to candidate thermometer ratings; (2) a substantial increase in Democratic identification; (3) more interest in the 2008 campaigns; (4) more concern over the outcome of the presidential election; and (5) a greater likelihood of being contacted by a political party.

The candidacy of Democrat Barack Obama would of course lead us to expect a positive shift in black political attitudes, and this should translate into higher turnout (Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009). Figure 2 displays self-reported and validated turnout for black and white respondents for the ANES time series of presidential
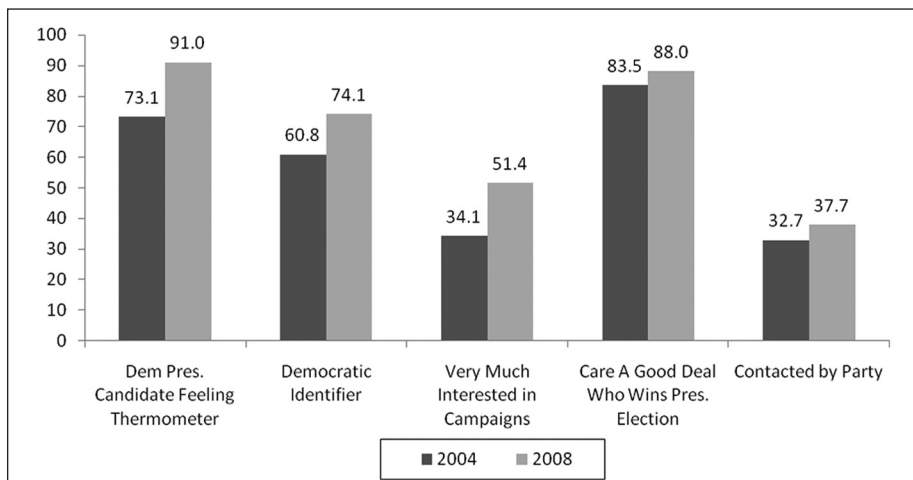
Figure 1. Party contact and key attitudes toward politics among African Americans, 2004 and 2008
Note: Data are from the 2004 and 2008 American National Election Studies (ANES). 2008 data are weighted to account for the oversample of African Americans. Total *N* for black respondents in 2004 = 176 and 2008 = 569. Democratic identifiers do not include independents who lean toward the Democratic party.

elections, 1948 through 2008.[4] The self-reported data show the racial turnout gap was finally closed in 2008 when 79% of blacks and whites both claimed voting. This is the highest self-reported black turnout rate ever recorded by the ANES. We have little reason to doubt that black turnout reached its apogee in 2008, but the validated data in Figure 2 make us skeptical as to what was the "true" rate of African American turnout.

In 1964 and 1976-1988, the ANES validated turnout with a consistent finding that it was notably lower than the self-reported rate (S. Traugott 1989). With the exception of 1964 when the vote overreport was 12.3 points for both blacks and whites, in all subsequent presidential years with validated voting, black overreporting has been much higher. From 1976 through 1988, white overreporting was 4.9 points (self-reported turnout was 74.2% vs. a validated rate of 69.3%). By comparison, over this span of four consecutive presidential elections, black overreporting was 12.7 points (self-reported turnout was 64.2% vs. a validated rate of 51.5%)—2.6 times greater than the number for whites.

Vote Overreporting in Survey Research

The tendency for surveys to record a higher rate of voting than verified data is an accepted reality of social science, documented repeatedly since the 1950s (see Parry and Crossley 1950).[5] Beyond instrument effects that stimulate voting, such as panel surveys (Martinez 2003; Presser and Traugott 1992; M. Traugott and Katosh 1979), it appears social desirability is the main culprit for the inflated rate of self-reported
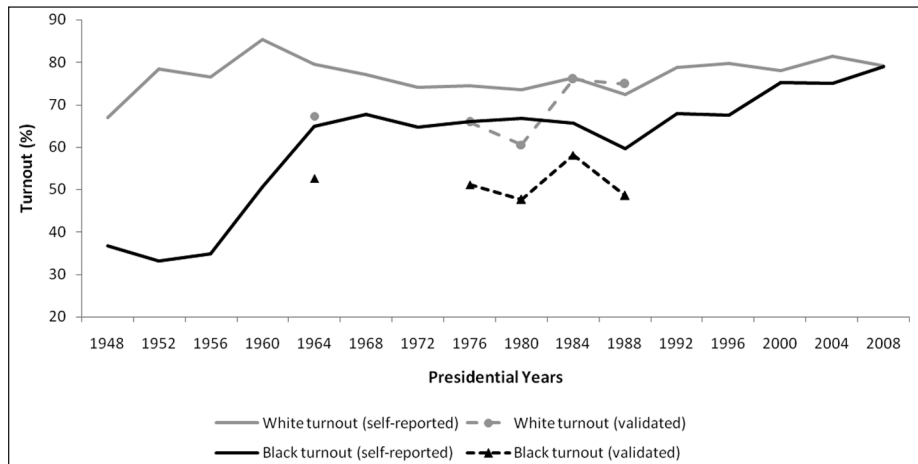
Figure 2. Self-reported and validated turnout for blacks and whites in presidential years, 1948-2008.
Note: Data compiled by the authors from the American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file (1948-2004) and the 2008 ANES. Data were weighted for the 2008 ANES in order to adjust for the oversample of African Americans. Validated turnout was done for the 1964 and 1976-1988 presidential elections. Black respondents are those who report being black and not Hispanic when the Hispanic question was added from 1980 forward in presidential years; likewise white respondents are also not Hispanic. In 2008 black respondents were those who stated they were black but not Hispanic and white respondents stated they were white but not Hispanic.

voting. "Voting is a highly valued democratic norm" (M. Traugott, Traugott, and Presser 1992, 3), and "in social science investigations . . . people tend to organize their behavior in light of what they feel the 'others' (interviewers, observers, laboratory experimenters) will expect is appropriate for someone like them in that kind of situation" (Phillips and Clancy 1972, 936).

This social desirability explanation is plausible when we consider the types of persons with a greater propensity to overreport—they do in fact look more like voters than nonvoters based on those characteristics that strongly correlate with turnout (i.e., socioeconomic status) (Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). But if it is generally true that nonvoters most susceptible to falsely claim voting share profiles better resembling voters, then how does one account for the considerable evidence that African Americans overreport at a higher rate than whites, since the former typically have a profile (lower socioeconomic status) that would make them less likely to vote?

The turnout literature makes it clear that blacks consistently overreport voting at higher rates than whites (Abramson and Claggett 1984; 1986; 1989; 1991; 1992; Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001; Cassel 2003; Hill and Hurley 1984; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Sigelman 1982; Silver, Abramson, and Anderson 1986; Traugott and Katosh 1979; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The work of Abramson and Claggett deserves special attention because in several studies they find that even after controlling for region (South/non-South) and socioeconomic status (education), black overreporting exceeds that of whites (1980 is the only presidential election when the

difference is not significant after these controls are included; see Abramson and Claggett 1984). Higher black overreporting persists even after accounting for lower quality record keeping in disproportionately African American precincts (Abramson and Claggett 1992). And despite evidence that the quality of election administration is much lower in certain black communities and this accounts for part of the higher rate of black overreporting (Presser, Traugott, and Traugott 1990), differences in the quality of voting records only narrowly reduce overreport rates (see Cassel 2004).

Although black overreport rates generally exceed those of whites, few studies offer explanations for why this is the case. Among the handful of works that explicitly tackle the question of what motivates a higher overreport propensity among African Americans, the reasons given appear credible. Black overreporting is linked with historical circumstances tied to the struggle for civil rights—especially the franchise. Remarking on the 1964 presidential election, Clausen (1968-1969, 595) anticipates that black self-reported voting was affected by "the clear-cut self-interest choice provided the Negro in the 1964 election, and the pressures exerted on him to vote." In a similar vein, Abramson and Claggett (1984, 721) write: "Blacks have struggled to gain the franchise, and it may be difficult for many to acknowledge that they failed to exercise it."[6] Finally, Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy (2001) contend that vote overreporting is closely tied to feelings of guilt. Blacks feel more pressure to falsely claim voting because of the shame of admitting not voting in a social milieu where "they have experienced or are told of the struggles and sacrifices that were necessary to obtain the vote for people like themselves and of their consequent duty to exercise that vote" (p. 27).

The aforementioned reasons for why African Americans are more likely to overreport voting are supported by the findings of Anderson, Silver, and Abramson (1988). Their study shows that blacks participating in the ANES who were interviewed by fellow African Americans were much more likely to overreport voting. But perhaps even more consequential is that they also find that blacks who reside in the South or in northern central cities are also mobilized to vote when interviewed by blacks. This is notable because African Americans residing in the South and northern central cities have a lower socioeconomic status than other blacks and yet they are stimulated to vote at a higher rate if their interviewer is African American. In this context, a shared racial identity, often referred to as group consciousness (Shingles 1981), apparently fostered black empowerment (Bobo and Gilliam 1990).[7]

The 2008 presidential election further complicates expectations regarding black turnout. Obviously this contest, for African Americans in particular, has no equivalent in the history of presidential politics. The pressure to falsely claim voting may have been unprecedented, and unlike 1964, when black overreporting was tempered in the South by acknowledgment of the reality that Jim Crow still restricted the franchise (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson 1988), there was no such impediment to voting in 2008. On the other hand, and just as compelling, mobilization efforts in 2008 (Masket 2009; Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009) and the desire to elect an African American probably pushed actual black voting to a new high.

In this study we examine turnout data from the state of Georgia in order to get an accurate sense of the rate of African American voting in the 2008 presidential election. In addition, we use multivariate analysis to assess which factors influenced the likelihood of black voting. The Peach State is an important case for studying African American turnout because it ranks third in the nation in both its black percentage of residents and its total number of African Americans.[8] We agree with the position of Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2002, 420), who contend that "research should be judged on the quality of the theory, the appropriateness of the research design, and the precision of the measurement, not on the number of states included in the analysis." In this case we are fortunate to have validated turnout data on the entire population of Georgia registrants for the 2004 and 2008 elections.

In the next section we compare validated registered turnout rates in the state of Georgia to self-reported registered turnout rates from the Current Population Survey. We then analyze validated black turnout in Georgia for: (1) a panel model of blacks registered to vote in 2004 and 2008 and (2) a turnout model for all blacks registered to vote in the 2008 election.

Analysis and Results

Before demonstrating the large disparities between validated turnout and self-reported turnout, we think it is useful to present some historical data on black political participation in Georgia spanning the previous four presidential elections (1996-2008). A cautionary note is in order because these data only show turnout and registration based on "active voters," defined as Georgia registrants who have voted at least once in the last four election cycles. Limiting the data to "active voters" considerably inflates turnout rates by understating the total number of registered voters, but it is unlikely that the trends captured by data on "active voters" will be any different from those for all registered voters.

It is well known among turnout scholars that presidential voting was on the decline since the 1960 election, reaching its nadir in 1996 (e.g., see the turnout data on the Voting Age Population and the Voting Eligible Population provided on Michael P. McDonald's Web site: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm), and then exhibiting an upward trend since 2000 (see McDonald 2008). The turnout data from Georgia show the same upward trend in presidential voting since 1996.

What we want to highlight from the data in Table 1 is the remarkable growth of the black electorate in Georgia, both in terms of participation and registration, and compare this to recent trends in white participation and registration. For instance, black turnout increased 22 points between 1996 and 2008 (going from 54% to 76%) whereas the increase among whites was 13 points (64% to 77%). At least among "active voters," in 2008 the racial turnout gap shrunk to 1 point, 76% versus 77% registered turnout for blacks and whites, respectively.[9] All the more remarkable is the changing data on black and white registration. Black registration goes from 65% in 1996 to 78% in 2008, surpassing the white registered rate of 74%—the same white registration

Table 1. Turnout and Registration Percentages for Blacks and Whites in Georgia, 1996-2008

Black and White Georgia registrants	1996	2000	2004	2008	2008 – 1996
Black registered turnout (%)	54	63	72	76	+22
White registered turnout (%)	64	71	80	77	+13
Difference (white minus black)	10	8	8	1	
Black registration (%)	65	61	64	78	+13
White registration (%)	74	69	69	74	0
Difference (white minus black)	9	8	5	−4	
Black percentage of registered population	24	25	27	30	+6
White percentage of registered population	74	72	69	63	−11
Difference (white minus black)	50	47	42	33	
Total black votes cast	497,086	615,723	834,331	1,182,509	+685,423
Total white votes cast	1,814,983	1,993,493	2,344,632	2,522,294	+707,311
Black registered population	929,525	980,033	1,155,706	1,560,419	+630,894
White registered population	2,822,012	2,792,479	2,917,322	3,258,454	+436,442

Note: These data only consist of what the Georgia Secretary of State deems "active voters." By definition, an "active voter" is a person who turned out at least once in the previous four election cycles. Circumscribing the data to just "active voters" inflates the registered turnout numbers. In all of our subsequent analyses, based on use of the Georgia Registration File (GRF), we include all registered voters (active and inactive). For the racial percentage of the registered population and the total registered population, the data entail all "active voters" of any racial/ethnic background (i.e., Hispanics, Asian, Others, etc.).

percentage in 1996. Since 1996 there has been a marked decline in the white percentage of the total registered population (going from 74% to 63%), whereas the black percentage of the registered Georgia population has increased from 24% in 1996 to 30% in 2008.

Finally, the increasing rate of African American participation and registration is substantially greater than the corresponding figures for white Georgians. The number of black votes cast in 2008 amounts to a 138% increase over the number cast in 1996. By comparison, there was a 39% increase in the number of white ballots cast for 2008 versus 1996. Finally, black registration in 2008 constitutes a 68% increase since 1996. By comparison, the increase in white registration over the same time period was 15% and the raw increase in black registration greatly surpassed white registration (630,894 black registrants vs. 436,442 white registrants). These data show that black participation in Georgia has been on a steady increase since 1996 and that the growing use of the franchise among African Americans was closing the historic racial gap in the state even prior to the 2008 election. We now turn to data on the entire registered population of black and white Georgians and compare validated turnout rates with self-reported turnout from the Current Population Survey.

Table 2. Self-Reported and Validated Turnout for Georgia Registrants in 2004 and 2008 (%)

Registered Black turnout	2004	2008	Change 2008 –2004
Current Population Survey	85.7	92.2	+ 6.5
Georgia Registration File	60.6	68.7	+ 8.1
Difference	25.1	23.5	− 1.6
Registered White turnout	2004	2008	Change 2008 – 2004
Current Population Survey	85.3	90.2	+ 4.9
Georgia Registration File	69.2	69.8	+ 0.6
Difference	16.1	20.4	+ 4.3

Note: Self-reported data are from the 2004 and 2008 voter supplements to the Current Population Survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau. The validated turnout data are the official statistics reported and released to the public in the Georgia Registration File maintained by the Georgia Secretary of State (www.sos.ga.gov/elections/).

Table 2 presents turnout data for registered Georgia respondents using the 2004 and 2008 CPS surveys and the population of residents from those same election cycles using archived copies of the Georgia Registration File. The data compare registered turnout for black and white Georgia registrants according to the CPS and GRF data. Similar to the overreport issue with respect to voting, overreporting registration is also commonplace (Fullerton, Dixon, and Borch 2007; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Traugott and Katosh 1979), and this can further inflate self-reported turnout. With this in mind, the self-reported registered turnout of black and white Georgia respondents is vastly higher than the validated registered turnout in 2004 and 2008. Consistent with most previous research, we see that the gap between self-reported versus validated turnout is higher for African Americans than for whites in 2004 (25.1 vs. 16.1 points) and 2008 (23.5 vs. 20.4 points).

What is surprising, however, is that white self-reported turnout actually increases in 2008; this strikes us as contrary to what we would expect given the electoral environment in 2008. The validated white turnout confirms our suspicion because it was virtually constant for 2004 and 2008 (and among "active voters" white turnout declined in 2008, as shown in Table 1). Previous research documents the propensity for Deep South whites to overreport voting at a higher rate than other whites (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy 2001). More specifically, the curious increase in white self-reported turnout speaks to evidence of racial threat; as explained by Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy (2001, 29): "Higher concentrations of minorities increase feelings of threat and pressures to vote but depress turnout . . . Anglos feel increasingly that they ought to vote, but they do not—and when they do not, they feel guilt."

Finally, we note the increase in black self-reported turnout is actually lower than the validated increase in turnout (6.5 vs. 8.1 points). The 8.1 percentage point increase in validated black turnout is not only a remarkably large jump, but it makes African American participation virtually equivalent to white turnout—a difference of only 1.1 points. The 2008 election had a profound effect on black mobilization. The percentage

of all Georgia registrants who were African American went from 27.5% in 2004 to 29.8% in 2008. Even more impressive, since January of 2005 and up until the 2008 election, the percentage of new registrants who were black was 56.7%. The expansion in black registration and participation explains why despite the half-hearted attention both presidential campaigns devoted to Georgia (see Bullock 2010), it was the seventh most competitive state based on victory margin (5.3 points separated McCain from Obama; data are from the Federal Election Commission). The increase in black turn-out also forced a heavily favored incumbent Republican U.S. Senator (Saxby Chambliss) into a runoff (Bullock and Gaddie 2009), which he then easily won because black turnout in the runoff sharply declined.

Multivariate Analyses of Black Voting

We take our evaluation of black turnout a step further by performing multivariate analyses on the validated data.[10] The GRF contains several important variables related to turnout, including gender, age, years registered, and indicators for the U.S. House and state legislative districts in which a registrant resides. Most importantly, for our purposes, Georgia is one of only five states that records the race/ethnicity of its regis-trants. In addition, the GRF can be linked to other external databases to determine the validated turnout history for registrants. We supplement these variables with addi-tional contextual information, such as county-level data for the percentage urban and percentage black registered voters, and zip code–level per capita income. Finally, given the district-level data in the GRF (U.S. House and state legislative district), we include dummy variables for whether a registrant's representative is African American and whether each of these offices was either contested or an open seat. We run two logistic regression models in order to estimate the likelihood that a black registrant in Georgia turned out to vote.

The first model is a panel designed to identify and isolate those registrants who were eligible to vote in 2004 and 2008. In this model the data are pooled for all black registrants who were eligible to vote in both 2004 and 2008 as indicated by archived copies of the GRF from those election cycles. The dependent variable is thus coded 1 if a respondent voted in 2004 or 2008 and 0 otherwise. The key variable of interest is an election indicator coded 1 for the 2008 election and 0 for 2004. After controlling for other factors we want to know the effect of the election year dummy on turnout for the 2004-2008 black registrant panel. The second column of Table 3 presents the results for the panel model. As expected, the election year dummy is positive and significant, black registrants in our panel were much more likely to turnout in the 2008 election. Specifically, after controlling for other factors the likelihood of voting in 2008 increased 1.7 points, going from .737 for this group in 2004 to .754 in 2008.[11]

The second model in Table 3 presents the results of a 2008 turnout regression that consists of the entire population of black registrants. In addition to including the uni-verse of black registrants eligible to vote in 2008, the model differs from the panel by omitting the *years registered* variable while including dummies for whether a

Table 3. Registered Black Turnout in Georgia: Panel and Cross Sectional Data on the 2004 and 2008 Elections

Independent variables	Panel 2004-2008	Cross section 2008
2008 election	.093 (.032)*	—
Gender and age		
Female	.425 (.009)**	.373 (.006)**
Age	.012 (.001)**	.010 (.001)**
Voter profile		
Years registered	.044 (.002)**	—
Voted in 2004	—	2.096 (.015)**
New registrant	—	.870 (.018)**
Demographic context		
Percentage urban (county)	.386 (.112)*	−.011 (.073)
Percentage black registered (county)	−.371 (.192)	−.262 (.139)
Per capita income (zip code)	.000012 (.000007)	.000011 (.000003)**
District-level factors		
Black U.S. House member	−.127 (.053)*	−.122 (.045)*
Black state senator	.121 (.057)*	.109 (.045)*
Black state house member	.030 (.051)	.084 (.040)*
Contested U.S. House	−.047 (.045)	−.013 (.036)
Contested state senate	.057 (.034)	.041 (.036)
Contested state house	−.096 (.045)*	−.063 (.034)
Open U.S. House	.158 (.053)*	−.024 (.047)
Open state senate	.072 (.033)*	.050 (.043)
Open state house	.044 (.050)	−.053 (.062)
Constant	−.800 (.137)**	−1.099 (.075)**
Correctly predicted	71.3%	72.3%
Proportional reduction in error	0.8%	12.8%
N	2,249,655	1,717,029

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered on zip code. Dependent variable in both models is 1 = voted, 0 = did not vote.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

registrant voted in 2004 and whether an individual registered on or after January 1, 2008—*new registrant*.[12] Whereas the first dummy accounts for evidence of habitual voting (Plutzer 2002), the second indicator speaks to mobilization. Both indicators should have a positive effect on the likelihood of voting. As shown in Table 3, these variables behave as expected and six other variables also have an effect on black turnout in 2008: gender, age, per capita income, and the three dummies for whether a registrant's representatives in Congress and the state legislature are African American. Older registrants, women, and those registrants residing in zip codes with higher levels of per capita income were more likely to vote in 2008. Finally, having an African
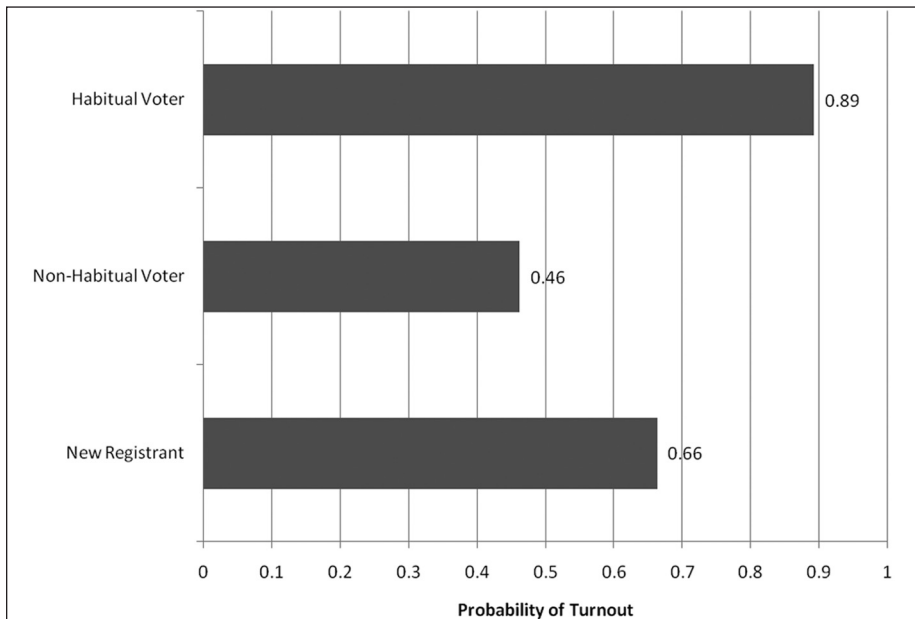
Figure 3. Turnout probabilities for black Georgia registrants by voter category in 2008
Note: Turnout probabilities were derived from the 2008 cross section model in Table 3.

American congressman depresses voting,[13] whereas having a black state legislator enhances turnout.

Figure 3 displays a set of simulated probabilities for our three primary groups of black registrants: habitual voters, nonhabitual voters, and new registrants. We set the remaining independent variables at the respective mean or modal value specific to the three groups under analysis. In this manner we can calculate the probability of turnout for the *average* registrant in each of these voter categories. Not surprisingly, habitual voters were highly likely, at .89, to have turned out to vote again in the 2008 general election. Habitual voters were followed in turnout likelihood by new registrants at .66. A very sizable gap of 43 points separates habitual from nonhabitual voters, with the latter group's turnout below the .50 threshold (at = .46).

The solid vertical lines in the three panels in Figure 4 correspond to the average probability of turnout for habitual voters (Panel A), nonhabitual voters (Panel B), and new registrants (Panel C), respectively. The horizontal bars represent deviations above or below this norm given changes in key independent variables. For habitual voters, altering characteristics such as age, gender, or income appear to have less influence on the probability of turnout. For example, men are 5 points less likely to vote than women and there is a 5-point gap between a 22-year-old registrant in this category and someone 65 years of age. Larger turnout gaps appear for both nonhabitual voters and new registrants. The gender gap in turnout is 9 points for nonhabitual voters and 8
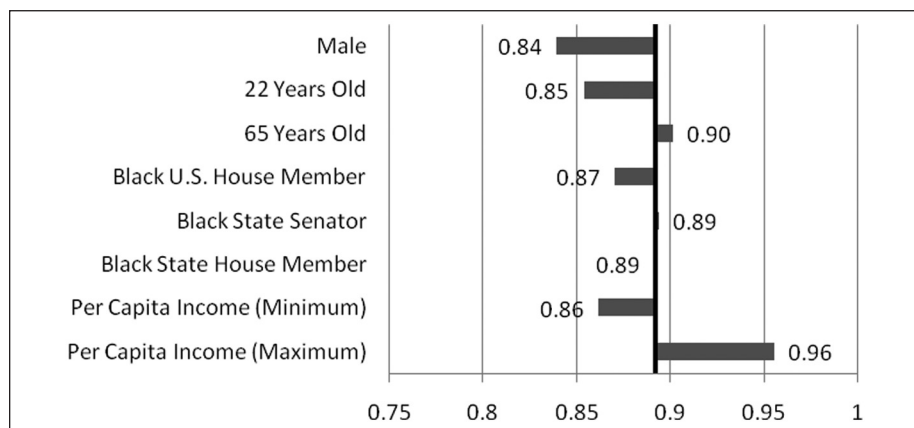
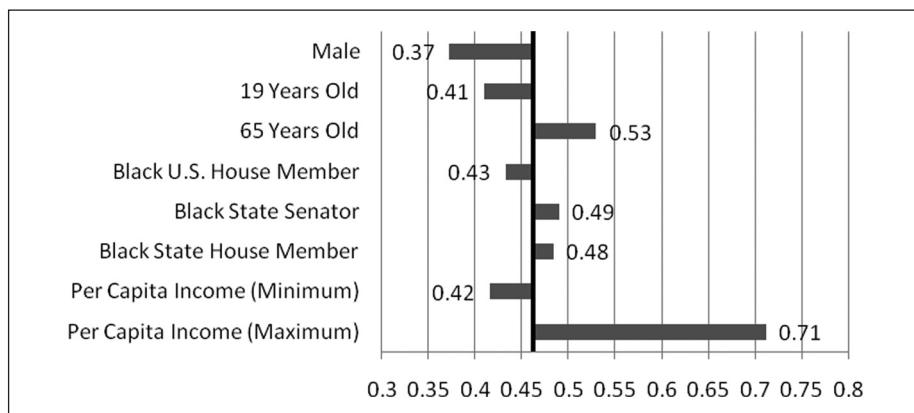**Figure 4a.** Turnout probabilities for habitual voters

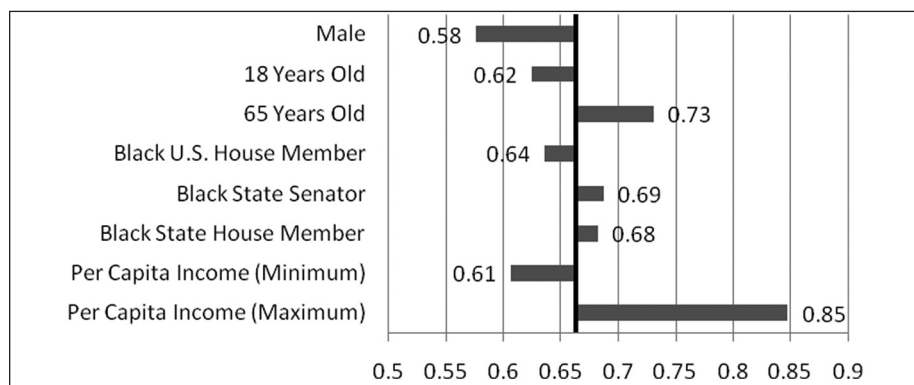**Figure 4b.** Turnout probabilities for nonhabitual voters

Figure 4c. Turnout probabilities for new registrants

points for new registrants. The probability differential produced by age is even larger, at 12 points for nonhabitual voters and 11 points for new registrants. Some of the largest effects on turnout within these two voter categories are related to income. Nonhabitual voters living in the zip code with the lowest income level had a .42 probability of voting in 2008, compared to .71 for registrants living in the zip code with the highest per capita income—a 29-point difference. Likewise, moving from the lowest to highest income category for new registrants increases the likelihood of turnout by 24 points, from .61 to .85.

Conclusion

The presence of the first African American major party nominee makes it imperative that scholars have access to validated data on black turnout because of the increased social pressure to claim voting on the one hand and the mobilizing force of Barack Obama's candidacy on the other. Consistent with past research, this study documents that black self-reported voting is substantially higher than comparable validated data on registered African Americans in the state of Georgia. Although validated turnout data for black Georgia registrants exhibits participation rates markedly lower than those reported by the Current Population Survey, there was a surge in participation between 2004 and 2008. Compared with 2004, the 35% increase in black registration (see Table 1) and the 13% increase in black turnout (see Table 2) essentially closed the racial gap in voting, and these high rates of mobilization speak to the significance of the opportunity to elect the first African American president.

In addition, we can decompose the source of the increase in voting using our multivariate analyses of validated black turnout. The black electorate can be subdivided into three groups: existing registrants who voted in 2004, existing registrants who did not vote in 2004, and new registrants. From Figure 3 one can see the probability of voting for these three groups is .89, .46, and .66, respectively. Using these data and some simple computations we can now state that in Georgia, 57% of black turnout in the 2008 general election can be attributed to existing registrants who were habitual voters (those who also voted in 2004), 19% of total turnout was composed of other existing registrants (nonhabitual voters), and the remaining 24% is associated with new registrants. From these figures one can see that close to a quarter of black turnout is due to the mobilization of new voters in the year prior to the election. In addition, the mobilization efforts of the Obama campaign are also evident among registrants who had not participated in the 2004 presidential contest.[14]

For those states that do make voter files economically available to researchers, we strongly encourage the future utilization of such data on the part of social scientists studying voter turnout (for an overview of state voter files, see Cooper, Haspel, and Knotts 2009; also McDonald 2007). In 2012, President Obama will be seeking a second term, and thus we should once again exercise caution when examining black turnout figures that lack verification. To be sure, validated data are not flawless, but registered voter files give us a much more accurate picture of the true rate of voting,

and this is critical in the case of the 2008 election and possibly the next presidential contest, when the social pressure to falsely claim voting may exceed the mobilizing influence of America's first black president.

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Notes

1. These data are available for 2004 and 2008, respectively, on CNN's Web site: www.cnn. com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html; www.cnn.com/ELEC-TION/2008/results/polls/#val=USP00p1.

2. Throughout this study we refer to the South as the 11 ex-Confederate states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. As was true over 60 years ago when V. O. Key, Jr. published *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), the South is still often subdivided into the Deep and Peripheral states. The Deep South refers to the states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina and the Peripheral South is comprised of Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The cardinal distinction between these Southern subregions is the percentage of the black population; the percentage of African Americans is higher in each of the Deep South states and this has directly contributed to greater racial polarization in voter preferences (McKee 2010).

3. This is a notable achievement for the only Southern state to enact a poll tax to curtail black political participation *before* the end of Reconstruction (Kousser 1974). In fact, Georgia's actions to restrict the franchise by implementing a poll tax preceded most Southern states by two decades. The first poll tax was implemented in 1868 by Republicans during Reconstruction, but it was quickly rescinded and then reenacted by Democrats in 1871 (Kousser 1974). In 1877, Georgia made the poll tax cumulative (Bullock and Gaddie 2009; Kousser 1974). The masterful study of Southern voting restrictions by J. Morgan Kousser (1974) leaves little doubt as to how effective the Georgia poll tax was for disfranchising African Americans. Consider first some quotes by those involved in Georgia politics when the poll tax was installed. "One knowledgeable observer termed Georgia's cumulative poll tax 'the most effective bar to Negro suffrage ever devised'" (Kousser 1974, 65). Similarly, "A. J. McKelway testified that the cumulative poll tax in Georgia 'practically disfranchised the Negroes' after 1877" (Kousser 1974, 66). But even more impressive and convincing are

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the data Kousser shows that make it patently clear how detrimental the poll tax was to black voting in Georgia when estimated black turnout rates are compared with the rest of the Southern states prior to their adoption of a poll tax (see his Figure 7.1 on p. 212). Whereas estimated black turnout in Georgia steadily declined after passage of the cumulative poll tax, in the remaining 10 Southern states estimated black turnout held constant over the period before implementation of a poll tax. Finally, Kousser points out that in 1880 the black percentage of the population in both Georgia and Florida was 47% and the only difference between these states regarding suffrage restrictions was that Georgia had a poll tax and Florida did not. In Georgia the estimated black turnout in the 1880 presidential election was 39% and in Florida the estimated black turnout was 88% (Kousser 1974, 68). By 1904 every Southern state had adopted a poll tax (Kousser 1974) and in 1945 Georgia finally abolished theirs (Bullock and Gaddie 2009). This historical side-note focuses on only one of the many devices Southern states eventually devised to systematically suppress black voting (others include literacy tests, understanding clauses, and the White Primary; see Key 1949 for a detailed assessment of the effects of these methods for reducing black participation). In summary, Georgia was a pioneer in restricting black suffrage, and like its Southern neighbors, especially its Deep South sisters, the Peach State was historically one of the worst offenders when it came to blocking black political participation.

4. Throughout our study we exclude Hispanics from the discussion and analyses. In the validated Georgia turnout data, Hispanics comprise a trivial percentage of the registered population (under 5%). For studies that examine validated Hispanic turnout, see Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000) and Cassel (2002).

5. According to M. Traugott, S. Traugott, and Presser (1992, 1-2), "Across a wide range of samples and surveys conducted by various organizations—the level of misreporting in these studies—the difference between self-reported rates of voting and those validated through administrative records—has consistently been in the range of 13 to 15 percentage points. According to the records, virtually all the errors consist of survey overreports; as about half the population doesn't vote (and is therefore at risk of overreporting), on the order of 25 to 30 percent of nonvoters appear to misreport."

6. Abramson and Claggett (1984, 721) go on to say that higher black overreporting linked to the civil rights struggle is "consistent with our finding that in three out of four surveys southern blacks were more likely to overreport voting than were blacks outside the South."

7. Admittedly, we are not hewing to the strict concept of black empowerment as developed by Bobo and Gilliam (1990). These scholars show that black participation responds positively after the election of an African American and obviously we are arguing that the presence of a black Democratic presidential nominee should spur greater black turnout.

8. According to the 2010 U.S. census counts, the top three states ranked according to their percentage of African Americans are Mississippi (37%), Louisiana (32%), and Georgia (30.5%) (these percentages are derived by dividing the total number of blacks/African Americans who claim "one race" by the total state population). The top three states ranked according to their total number of African Americans are New York (3,073,800; 15.9% African American), Florida (2,999,862; 16% African American), and Georgia (2,950,435; 30.5% African American).

9. Data on turnout for the voting age population (VAP) tell a similar story, but we are reluctant to place as much emphasis on these numbers because the voting age population includes a considerable number of residents who are not in fact eligible to vote (i.e., the incarcerated and adult noncitizens) and this is why measures of the voting eligible population are preferred (see McDonald and Popkin 2001). The most precise measure we have in the case of Georgia is registered turnout according to race. We do not have data for turnout by race according to the voting eligible population for each race (defined as everyone who can potentially vote, including the registered and unregistered). Finally, another problem with turnout data by race according to the voting age population is that the VAP for each race has to be interpolated across election years since the most accurate counts are those corresponding to census years (in this case 2000 and 2010). When we interpolate the VAP for blacks and whites from 1996 to 2008 we get the following numbers for black and white turnout in Georgia based on the voting age population: black turnout among the black voting age population was 35% in 1996, 38% in 2000, 46% in 2004, and 59% in 2008; white turnout among the white voting age population was 47% in 1996, 49% in 2000, 55% in 2004, and 57% in 2008. Hence the data for turnout by race according to the VAP show a 10 percentage point increase for whites between 1996 and 2008 and a rather astounding 24 percentage point increase for African Americans over the same time period, with black VAP turnout exceeding the white participation rate by 2 points in 2008. Again, we do not place as much credence in these numbers because the data provided in the Georgia Registration File are much more accurate—accounting, albeit with some error, for the truly eligible population of Georgia voters according to race, all those who were registered to vote in the 2008 election.

10. Because the Georgia Registration File is limited to only those individuals who have registered to vote, we cannot model registration and turnout as a two-stage process like the analysis performed by Timpone (1998). Despite this shortcoming, most analyses that examine voter turnout as a two-stage process fail to find significantly correlated errors across registration and turnout equations and there is not marked coefficient bias due to estimating turnout models that are limited to registered subsamples. We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing these points to our attention.

11. As a point of comparison we did specify a full interactive model where all independent variables were multiplied by the 2008 election indicator. In terms of statistically significant election-specific differences, we can report that black women were more likely to vote in 2008 along with registrants residing in a state house district with a black incumbent. Conversely, the level of urbanization, years registered, and open state house and congressional seats are associated with lower levels of turnout in 2008 compared with 2004.

12. The excluded or comparison category is anyone registered prior to the 2008 calendar year who did not participate in the 2004 general election. As these three groups are mutually exclusive, the nonhabitual voter category also includes a subset of individuals who registered from November of 2004 through December of 2007, and thus would not have been able to vote in the 2004 general election.

13. We are not entirely sure why there is a negative relationship between black voting and having a black U.S. House Representative. To the extent that congressional districts are substantially more populous than Georgia state legislative districts, this is not a very fine unit

of analysis (N = 13). The four U.S. House districts represented by African Americans (GA 2, GA 4, GA 5, and GA 13) include most of the state's African American population, whose blacks on average have a lower socioeconomic status than African Americans residing in congressional districts represented by white congressmen, and this might contribute to the negative effect on turnout, but on the other hand, our models include a control for income.

14.

Voter category	Turnout (P)	Registered (actual)	Estimated turnout	Percentage of Total
Habitual voters	.89	790,046	704,721	57
Nonhabitual voters	.46	495,871	229,092	19
New registrants	.66	446,158	295,803	24
Total	.71	1,732,075	1,229,616	

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